Chapter I – Summary

Michael Howard opens the book by establishing the conceptual framework of Britain's continental policy across the long arc between 1900 and 1940, arguing that the so-called "continental commitment" was never a straightforward military doctrine but a deeply contested strategic idea at the heart of British statecraft. Howard carefully reconstructs the intellectual battle between two visions: on the one hand, the traditional maritime strategy that viewed the Royal Navy as both shield and sword of the Empire; and on the other hand, a reluctantly emergent recognition that Britain could not prevent the rise of a hegemonic power in Europe without bearing significant military burdens on land. The early twentieth century exposed the limits of navalism, as Germany's industrial, naval, and demographic growth forced British planners to reconsider whether sea power alone could manage continental dangers. Yet Howard stresses that this pressure did not immediately produce a coherent policy. Instead, it generated a chronic ambiguity at the center of British strategic thinking: the Empire's global commitments required dispersion of resources, but the European balance of power required concentration. This structural contradiction shaped every major defense decision leading into both world wars.

Howard's narrative emphasizes that political culture mattered as much as military arithmetic. The British public, and many elites, remained instinctively hostile to continental entanglements; memories of the Boer War, the ethos of liberal imperialism, and the enduring prestige of the Royal Navy all reinforced resistance to a large standing army. Meanwhile, senior soldiers, especially the General Staff, increasingly recognized that the defense of France—and thereby of the Channel coast—was inseparable from the preservation of Britain's own security. This tension created a peculiar dynamic: the British Army planned for continental war long before political leaders would openly admit such a commitment existed. Howard demonstrates that this disjunction between planning and policy produced institutional confusion, budgetary instability, and repeated cycles of rearmament and retrenchment. Chapter I thus sets the stage for the central argument of the book: Britain's dilemma was not simply whether to intervene on the Continent, but how to reconcile a global imperial identity with the stark geographic fact that European power politics could not be ignored without courting national catastrophe.

Chapter II – Summary

Howard begins Chapter II by analyzing how Britain's strategic framework evolved from the end of the First World War through the 1920s, showing that the postwar environment did not resolve the old dilemma but deepened it. Britain emerged victorious but exhausted, financially strained, and politically committed to avoiding another continental catastrophe. The trauma of 1914–18 produced a pacifist or near-pacifist political mood, while the Treasury drove a ruthless campaign of budget reductions. Howard stresses that the interwar years were marked by a systematic unwinding of military commitments: the Army shrank, the RAF prioritized imperial policing, and the Royal Navy was forced —via the Washington Naval Treaties—into a new era of parity with the United States and Japan. Yet the need for a continental strategy did not disappear. France remained Britain's only plausible partner in maintaining European stability, but mutual distrust persisted beneath cordial diplomacy. Howard emphasizes that while British leaders spoke publicly about collective security and the League of Nations, they privately feared entanglement in French strategic schemes that might drag Britain back into continental war.

The chapter highlights the structural contradictions of British defense policy during this period. The General Staff continued to plan for the possibility of deploying an expeditionary force to France, even as political leaders starved the Army of resources and refused to articulate such a commitment openly. Meanwhile, the rise of air power created new strategic anxieties: many politicians believed that future

war would begin with devastating air attacks on London, leading to a scramble for air defenses rather than a balanced rearmament program. Howard presents the interwar decision-making environment as defined by fiscal austerity, political caution, and wishful thinking. Britain hoped that collective security, arms control, and the Versailles settlement would obviate the need for major ground commitments, yet it prepared—haphazardly—for the opposite outcome. The dilemma of the continental commitment thus persisted: Britain could neither afford to rearm for a European war nor afford to assume such a war would never come.

Chapter III – Summary

In Chapter III, Howard examines the emergence of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime as the decisive catalyst that forced Britain to confront the inadequacy of its interwar defense structure. Beginning in 1933, Germany's repudiation of the Versailles constraints and rapid rearmament shattered the illusion that the European balance could be maintained through diplomacy alone. Yet Howard shows that Britain did not immediately respond with coherent strategic planning. Instead, the government oscillated between appeasing German grievances, attempting to rebuild ties with France, and pouring resources into air rearmament to meet the perceived "knock-out blow" threat. The continental commitment was again avoided in formal policy: ministers feared that openly planning for a land war against Germany would collapse the fragile political consensus behind rearmament. But within the military establishment, the Army and the General Staff increasingly recognized that any real attempt to contain Germany would require a substantial British field force.

Howard argues that 1936–38 marked the moment when Britain finally began to accept that a continental commitment was unavoidable, though it still refused to articulate this publicly. The Rhineland crisis exposed the hollowness of Britain's military posture; the failure to act convinced Hitler that Britain lacked both will and capability. As German power surged, British policymakers faced the same old dilemma under more urgent conditions: every diversion of resources to air defense or the Empire weakened the ability to field an army for Europe. Howard highlights the tragic paradox that by the time Britain recognized the necessity of a continental commitment, it was too late to prepare adequately. Munich bought time but deepened the illusion that diplomacy might avert war; when the crisis finally arrived in 1939, Britain entered the conflict with its land forces weak, its strategic doctrine unresolved, and its political leadership still unsure of the scale of commitment required. Chapter III thus underlines the central thesis: Britain's strategic failures were not the result of ignorance but of the structural impossibility of reconciling global imperial obligations with European security demands.

Chapter IV – Summary

In Chapter IV, Howard turns to the 1930s and examines how British policymakers struggled to reconcile the accelerating danger of Nazi rearmament with the entrenched political and institutional patterns of the interwar period. He emphasizes that Britain's dominant strategic fear between 1934 and 1937 was not invasion, nor even continental collapse, but the threat of "a knock-out blow from the air." This doctrine—immensely influential in British politics—channeled scarce resources into the RAF and civil-defense preparations, sidelining long-term investment in a modern field army. Howard shows that this choice was not simply irrational: policymakers genuinely believed that any future war would begin with catastrophic air raids on London, and thus that air deterrence, not continental engagement, was the key to national survival. Yet he argues that this focus on air defense created profound distortions in British rearmament. It allowed the Cabinet to postpone explicit acceptance of a continental commitment while maintaining the illusion that air power alone could preserve both Britain's security

and diplomatic freedom of maneuver.

Meanwhile, Howard shows that Germany’s strategic posture was rapidly undermining Britain's assumptions. The remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 revealed that the Franco-British deterrent system had collapsed. Yet Britain still refused to commit to concrete military guarantees for France or Eastern Europe. The Cabinet insisted on flexibility and refused to be drawn into automatic commitments that would transform diplomacy into a rigid confrontation. Howard argues that this reluctance reflected more than wishful thinking: it reflected the material weakness of the British Army, which was unprepared to act decisively at any point during the mid-1930s. The desperate attempts to reconcile these contradictions—appeasement, limited and unbalanced rearmament, and reliance on air power—defined British strategy during these crucial years. Chapter IV concludes by stressing that, by avoiding explicit commitments, Britain preserved diplomatic freedom but sacrificed strategic credibility, thereby encouraging German adventurism while leaving itself dangerously unprepared for continental war.

Chapter V – Summary

Chapter V examines the decisive years 1937–1939, when the erosion of the European balance finally compelled Britain to confront the reality that a continental war was coming—and that it was not prepared. Howard shows that the British government, despite years of evasions, now recognized that maintaining European stability required a commitment to defend France and potentially the Low Countries. Yet political leaders still refused to articulate this openly, fearing both public backlash and diplomatic entanglement. The result was a dual-track strategy: Britain accelerated rearmament, especially in the Army, while simultaneously pursuing appeasement to buy time. Howard stresses that appeasement was not born of naïveté, but of strategic necessity. Britain needed additional months—perhaps years—to complete rearmament programs, expand the Territorial Army, and prepare the expeditionary force that would inevitably be required to fight Germany on the continent.

Howard emphasizes that this period also revealed deep tensions between the services. The Army demanded priority to allow for continental deployment; the RAF insisted that air power remained the decisive arm; and the Royal Navy warned of overstretch across imperial routes. With finite resources, the government had to choose, and its decisions reflected ambivalence more than strategy. Even as Hitler’s ambitions became unmistakable—Austria, Czechoslovakia, the destruction of the Versailles order—the British Cabinet continued to oscillate between deterrence and diplomacy. The Munich crisis illustrated both the value and danger of this approach: Britain bought time but at the cost of further undermining its credibility. By early 1939, Howard argues, Britain finally committed to a continental strategy in practice, but far too late to fully execute it. The chapter ends with the stark conclusion that Britain entered the Second World War in September 1939 with a policy that was coherent only on paper and a military establishment unprepared for the scale of the conflict ahead.

Chapter VI – Summary

In Chapter VI, Howard analyzes Britain’s strategic posture in the first year of the Second World War, emphasizing that the so-called “Phoney War” period exposed the full consequences of the interwar failure to articulate a coherent continental strategy. Although Britain had declared war in defense of Poland, Howard stresses that the British Army was wholly unprepared for a major continental campaign. The British Expeditionary Force deployed to France was small, lightly equipped, and

doctrinally underdeveloped. Meanwhile, the RAF and the Royal Navy continued to absorb the overwhelming share of resources, reflecting the pre-1939 assumption that air deterrence and maritime supremacy—not land power—remained Britain's strategic center of gravity. Howard argues that British planners hoped economic warfare would substitute for a decisive confrontation: by blockading Germany and leveraging imperial resources, they hoped to squeeze German industry and compel political collapse. Yet this misplaced faith in economic strategy further delayed the urgent task of expanding the Army and integrating British operational planning with France.

Howard shows that these structural weaknesses were compounded by political and bureaucratic inertia. The British government was reluctant to centralize wartime administration, still committed to consensual, committee-based decision-making unsuited to rapid mobilization. Moreover, coordination with France remained haphazard. The French High Command expected a long war of attrition, while Britain still hoped that limited commitments would suffice. This divergence created a fatal ambiguity in Allied planning. As Germany consolidated its gains in Poland and reorganized for the western offensive, Britain failed to build the logistical and industrial base required for large-scale land warfare. Chapter VI concludes that by the spring of 1940, Britain had entered the conflict without the military structure or doctrinal unity needed to withstand a German onslaught—setting the stage for the catastrophic events of May and June.

Chapter VII – Summary

Chapter VII examines the collapse of France in 1940 as the decisive moment that finally exposed—and demolished—the strategic illusions that had guided British policy for decades. Howard argues that the speed and scale of the German victory were not simply failures of French military leadership, but the culmination of structural imbalances that plagued the entire Anglo-French alliance. The French Army, exhausted by years of political turmoil and demographic weakness, was unprepared for the operational dynamism of Blitzkrieg. Britain, meanwhile, had only a token force on the Continent, incapable of altering the strategic balance. Howard stresses that the British political leadership, including Churchill, did not fully grasp the imminence of French collapse until it was already irreversible. This miscalculation reflected years of overestimating French resilience as a substitute for Britain's own failure to build a continental army.

Howard emphasizes that the fall of France forced Britain into a radical strategic transformation. The continental commitment, previously evaded or diluted, now became inescapable: Britain would have to fight Germany without a major ally on the ground, and it would have to reconstruct its land forces from the ground up. The evacuation at Dunkirk, although a tactical miracle, underscored Britain's underlying weakness—an expeditionary force saved but stripped of its equipment and unable to influence the continental balance. Howard argues that the trauma of 1940 reshaped British strategy fundamentally: Britain would no longer avoid continental commitments, but would now embrace them as the core of its long-term war aims. The chapter ends with a stark lesson: the interwar refusal to articulate and resource a continental strategy had not preserved British freedom but destroyed it, leaving Britain isolated in a world dominated by German military power.